Responsibility for Justice

Iris Marion Young

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Note on the Text and Acknowledgments

When Iris Marion Young died in August 2006 she had characteristically devoted the first half of the summer working to help each of her graduate students move to the next stage in their work. Three days before she died, Iris told me she hoped then to have six solid weeks to edit her manuscript of *Responsibility for Justice*.

Iris had described her general intentions to me several months earlier. She planned to make the text more consistent in terminology and tone. She hoped to soften a few more rough-hewn formulations that dated from the original shaping of these ideas some five or six years earlier. No doubt she would have made the text livelier and struggled to reduce scholarly exegesis, as she had in earlier works. One or two of her readers had suggested that she was too harsh on fellow writers, and she wanted to reconsider those criticisms as well. Two footnotes in this book indicate places where she planned to insert discussions.

I have made none of these changes. The text stands as Iris had last assembled it in electronic files in 2005. David Newstone, an editor and former teaching assistant for Iris, kindly corrected grammar, completed citations, and improved the flow of the text with wonderful parsimony. I thank the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago and its chair at the time, Dali Yang, for supporting Mr. Newstone in this work.

Iris had dedicated previous books to members of her family. If she could dedicate her last book, perhaps it would be first to her students and colleagues near and far, whose positive and negative criticisms moved her forward. They should know that she thrived on their critiques as much as she enjoyed their praise. Perhaps most of all Iris would want to dedicate this book to the countless women and men who have named and described systematic

injustice and expressed their visions of better ways of life. People who voice claims of oppression and justice inspired Iris to learn more about the world and, without romanticizing those claims, to think far more clearly and deeply about their theoretical implications. She delighted in the courage and vision of these activists and, when available, their criticism and praise.

—David Alexander

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Foreword

Martha C. Nussbaum

Iris Young was one of our era's most creative and influential political theorists. She was also an exceptional person and colleague, and since it was as a colleague that I knew her, I cannot talk about her last book without first trying to convey what an extraordinary person she was.

Let me begin with my first meeting with her. In around 1995 I was in Frankfurt to lead a seminar for a budding women's studies program in the philosophy department. Iris had been there teaching for several weeks, so after the seminar she and I and the other women's studies faculty went out to dinner. It quickly became clear to me that in that short time she had developed warm supportive relationships with the female faculty and graduate students, knew their projects, and was infusing them with an invaluable sort of hope and confidence. Then Iris proposed that we should all speak German. At that time I could read pretty well but was desperately bad at speaking. So was Iris. But that did not deter her. She was determined that we would not behave like visiting dignitaries, but would make ourselves vulnerable, and promote a more equal type of friendship, by stumbling and blundering around in our hosts? language. I would have been embarrassed to make so many errors, and I kept on being embarrassed as I did so. But Iris had the courage of true concern, as, with her characteristic warmth and directness, she said whatever she could and then stopped to inquire about the rest. She created a wonderful spirit in the group by that one gesture.

When I heard that Iris was coming to the University of Chicago, then, I already felt very happy for our graduate students, and it was indeed a happy era. Iris was in political science and I in philosophy, but we worked with a lot of the same students, and I came to know on a daily basis Iris's wonderful capacity for intellectual empathy. Many students wrote on topics on which Iris

herself had written, but there were also many who came to Iris just because she was Iris, whether or not they thought she knew anything about their topic. One woman was working on the "capabilities approach" in the area of environmental policy–making. I went to the prospectus exam wondering whether Iris would really encourage such a project, which focused on a body of work in philosophy and economics that was rather distant from Iris's own work, though a major part of my own. Not that I thought she'd have any hostility toward the project; I just didn't know whether she'd get inside it. I needn't have asked the question. Iris was totally inside the nature of the project, had her usual rigorous objections and suggestions, but also her characteristic maternal warmth that let the student know she was going to be all right. Iris was a mother in the best sense, fostering development toward high ideals while conveying a sense of ultimate safety and support, something like unconditional love if that can exist in the relationship between professor and graduate student.

Whenever Iris was in a seminar or faculty discussion group, whenever we discussed drafts of her or my work in progress, it was the same there too: always keen criticisms, some of which have been reshaping some of my work; but always the sense that underlying that was a huge reservoir of warmth and joie de vivre that embraced us both and the whole enterprise we were engaged in together. After her hospitalization in 2005, when her hair started to grow back and her weight gradually went up, it was a joy to witness the personality of Iris beginning to flourish anew, as her sheer delight in every part of our academic life, even the boring and terrible parts, shone in her eyes, and just the sight of her characteristic walk, as she approached, made everyone around her happier.

Once when Iris was in the hospital, in May 2005, she asked me to read a paper aloud for her at the American Philosophical Association. I was honored to do so, but I felt so keenly my not-being-Iris, as I realized not only my utter inability to answer questions about her paper (which is not too surprising), but also my lack of certain Irisean features of connection with the audience, of that particular quality of warmth and that willingness to be vulnerable that I had seen so long ago in Frankfurt. Of the voice of Iris, which now lives only in her work.

At her untimely death, Iris Young left the manuscript of a mostly completed book called *Responsibility for Justice.* It is a major book, one of her very best things. Iris did not have time to

complete it as she would have wished. Many footnotes remained to be filled in; fortunately her husband Dave Alexander, understood her plans and has supervised this completion. One crucial chapter still takes the form of an independent paper on Hannah Arendt, and it was Iris's plan to integrate the argument of that paper fully into the book, with a consequently diminished focus on the exegesis of Arendt's ideas. But it is clear that she intended some version of the paper to be the third chapter of the book. A separate paper on Fanon on historic injustice, which discusses the question of reparations for slavery, remains less clearly placed in the project as a whole. It discusses similar questions in a similar way, but it does not contribute a missing piece to the argument, thus it functions as an appendix rather than a chapter. Finally, Dave tells me that in revising Iris always attended to clarity, rewriting a good deal to make her ideas more accessible and transparent to her readers. I find the existing manuscript extremely clear, but Dave feels that she would have worked even further on that aspect.

What I shall try to do in this foreword is, first, to give an overall idea of how Iris argues in the book, and of the contribution of each of its chapters; and second, to describe in more detail the book's key argument concerning the distinction between guilt and responsibility; and finally, third, to puzzle over that distinction and to suggest an alternative formulation, since I think the best way to honor Iris's daring and provocative contribution is to wrestle with it. My main aim throughout, however, is to allow you all to hear Iris's voice.

I. The Argument

Responsibility for Justice begins with a focus on economic inequality within the United States. (Later the scope of the argument is extended to take in global inequalities.) Young notes that there has been a shift in the way in which government officials, journalists, and the public think and talk about poverty: the primary causes of being poor, instead of being seen as social, are currently understood as personal. "On this account," she writes, "the social segments that tend to be poor do not take responsibility for their lives as much as members of other groups, and too often they engage in deviant or self-destructive behavior. Public assistance programs only add to the problem by allowing these deviant segments to expect handouts

in return for which they need do nothing." The purpose of the first chapter of the book, entitled "From Personal to Political Responsibility," is to look critically at some assumptions that lie behind this shift in thinking.

Focusing on the writings of Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead, Young finds three assumptions embedded in their analysis. First, they assume that we have to choose, in describing poverty, between an account focused on personal responsibility and one invoking structural causation; a single coherent account cannot involve both. Second, by assuming that poor people can improve their lot by effort and will, Mead and Murray assume that background conditions are basically fair, not unfairly stacked against the poor. Third, they assume that the only problem of personal responsibility that needs attention is the personal responsibility of poor people: it is implicitly suggested that all other people properly discharge their responsibilities.

Young argues that, although this mode of thinking is most prominent on the right, it also underlies some prominent analyses on the left. And she notes that this idea of personal responsibility has displaced an older shared understanding, perhaps most prominent in the welfare states of Europe but now threatened there as well, that "the members of a whole society collectively bear responsibility for taking care of one another's old age, health care, and support for children, and keeping us out of poverty." It is this older understanding that the book intends to revive, with new arguments and a fresh perspective on its contributions.

Concerning the first assumption, Young argues that there is no need to think that we have a binary choice between a focus on the personal and a focus on the structural. In the end, in her view, all responsibility is at some level personal, in the sense that the individual is the central locus of ethical responsibility. Nonetheless, one must recognize the crucial role of structures in producing injustice, even in cases where individual actors may be going about their business in a normal way and not intending to do any harm. A good analysis will attend, then, both to personal and to structural factors in the genesis of poverty.

Concerning the second assumption, Young announces her intent to argue that there are indeed serious structural problems in the background conditions in our current U.S. situation that make it difficult, if not impossible, for poor people to better their lot.

Concerning the third assumption, Young notes that pinning blame on the poor has had, in the arguments she criticizes, the consequence of deflecting attention from the possibly questionable behavior of others. This "absolving function," as she calls it, is one of the main attractions of the discourse of personal responsibility for many Americans. Clearly, however, it is wrong simply to assume that the non-poor have behaved well and discharged all their responsibilities, especially without first articulating and defending a general account of ethical responsibility. Young notes that most people do not really believe that being ethically responsible means simply avoiding dependence on others. "A more realistic understanding of being responsible, one that better matches what most people think, might go something like this: a responsible person tries to deliberate about options before acting, makes choices that seem to be the best for all affected, and worries about how the consequences of his or her actions may adversely affect others." This is a demanding standard, and Murray and Mead have not shown that the non-poor meet it.

Young concludes this chapter by applying her insights to Ronald Dworkin's theory and to the related theory of John Roemer, which, unlike Dworkin's, makes room for structural injustice.

Young's second chapter, entitled "Structure as the Subject of Justice," argues that political, economic, and social structures must be central to any good account of the genesis of poverty: we cannot handle the task by appealing to individual responsibility alone. She begins with the complex example of a woman named Sandy, who is forced into homelessness by a combination of factors: condo conversion where she has been living; the high cost of rental housing, combined with the demand for a three-month security deposit; the need to live near transportation to her workplace and in a neighborhood where she feels her children will be safe and have good schools to go to; a sex-segregated labor market that makes low-wage service jobs the primary option for women without college degrees. Young notes that we can certainly identify some elements of personal responsibility in Sandy's situation, including her earlier educational choices, her choice to get divorced, and her choice to value highly her children's education. Nonetheless, we also feel that something has gone badly wrong when a person like Sandy cannot find a place to live that she can afford.

Can we blame Sandy's situation on specific individuals with whom she has come into contact? Going through the available

options, Young argues that we really can't. "No particular agent she encounters has done her a specific wrong," yet she suffers injustice. This injustice can be analyzed only at the structural level, by talking about the way the housing market works, the way the service economy works, and so forth. Nor can we pinpoint a particular unjust policy as its origin.

Its causes are not so immediate as the persons with whom the wronged sufferer interacts, and not so focused as a single policy. The sources of the generalized circumstances of being vulnerable to homelessness are multiple, large scale, and relatively long term. Many policies, both public and private, and the actions of thousands of individuals acting according to normal rules and accepted practices contribute to producing these circumstances.

Methodologically, Young is an individualist, and she notes that it's a good thing that social theory has moved away from the old debate about that question: "Few theorists of social structures deny that individual actors produce them." Nonetheless, the fact that individuals produce social structures does not entail that particular individuals can be rightly blamed for the failures of those structures: the individuals may be acting in a normal and acceptable manner, yet the cumulative effect of their actions may be to produce an unjust situation. "Social structure, then, refers to the accumulated outcomes of the actions of the masses of individuals enacting their own projects, often uncoordinated with many others."

The second chapter ends with a close examination of John Rawls's argument concerning the "basic structure" as the central subject of justice. While agreeing with Rawls against some of his critics, Young argues that Rawls's account of what forms part of the basic structure is somewhat too narrow. He selects a set of very basic institutions, without acknowledging the many ways in which these are continuous with diffuse social processes. Young, by contrast, urges us to look at the whole society, seeing "patterns in relations among people and positions they occupy in relation to one another."

The third and fourth chapters are the heart of the book. In the Arendt paper that Young intended to revise as chapter 3, Young follows Arendt to some extent but also criticizes her formulations in some ways. She argues that we ought to distinguish guilt from responsibility. When we apply the concept of guilt to someone, we are blaming them for something that they have done in the

past. The function of guilt is to locate fault, to single out for either moral or legal blame. It is usually not appropriate to ascribe guilt to a group as such, unless we have some reason to conceive of the group as a collective agent (as in the case of guilt ascribed to corporations, for example). Responsibility, by contrast, is a forward-looking concept. To ascribe responsibility to a person is to say that they have a job to do. We can hold either individuals or groups responsible, and responsibility for social ills is typically shared among many agents. People can be responsible without being guilty.

Young rejects Arendt's suggestion that people bear responsibility simply because they are members of a political community; however, she does think that the sort of participation in political processes that licenses the ascription of responsibility does not entail an ascription of guilt. A typical case will be the passive or normally active behavior of non-malicious people who simply go along with their society's way of doing things. These people, Young argues, are not guilty "and should not be blamed." Nonetheless, they are cases of "a political responsibility not taken up."

Because we dwell on the stage of history, and not simply in our houses, we cannot avoid the imperative to have a relationship with actions and events performed by institutions of our society, often in our name, and with our passive or active support. The imperative of political responsibility consists in watching these institutions, monitoring their effects to make sure they are not grossly harmful, and maintaining organized public space where such watching and monitoring can occur and citizens can speak publicly and support one another in their efforts to prevent suffering.

In chapter 4, "A Social Connection Model," Young now puts these ideas to work analyzing the structural injustices that she has described in the second chapter. The social dynamics of Sandy's situation are not helpfully analyzed in terms of guilt. Pinning guilt on someone is not appropriate, first, because in such cases there really has not been any bad behavior: no malice and, or so Young argues, no negligence. Although many actions of many individuals contribute to the unjust outcome, no individual has a large enough causal role to be blamed for that outcome.

Moreover, the focus on guilt is pragmatically damaging: by seeking to pin blame on individuals, we absolve others, and thus

those others may be able to go on ignoring the fact that as citizens we have a shared responsibility of the type she has described. "A rhetoric of blame in politics often seeks a single or a few particularly powerful actors who have caused the problems, often some public officials.... The power of some actors is improperly inflated and that of many others is ignored." We also deflect attention away from the nature of the background conditions within which agents make choices. Finally, we produce defensiveness rather than cooperative helpfulness: "Rhetoric of blame in public discussion of social problems... usually produces defensiveness and unproductive blame-switching." Even when people do acknowledge guilt, finally, the "blame game" usually produces an unhelpful sort of self-focus: "People become more focused on themselves, their past actions, the state of their souls and their character, than on the structures that require change.... Such self-indulgence can distract us from discussing more objectively how social structures operate, how our actions contribute to them, and what can be done to change them."

Young then argues that the most helpful concept with which to approach structural injustice is that of shared responsibility. We turn away from the past and toward the future, accepting, collectively, the fact that as citizens we bear responsibility for monitoring political institutions and ensuring that such structural injustices do not arise within them, or, if they are already there, that they are ameliorated.

In chapter 5, "Responsibility across Borders," Young turns from domestic politics to the global sphere. She argues that what she has called the social connection model is helpful in facing global inequalities. Thinking in terms of shared responsibility for global conditions might at first seem paralyzing: "How can I begin to take action to discharge my responsibility in the face of such massive and diverse problems?" Many injustices in the world result from structural processes, but it seems hard for individuals to accept even a shared responsibility for so many of them.

Young now boldly asserts that the demanding nature of our responsibility under the social connection model is a reason to embrace it, not to reject it. The fact that we are parts of many causal networks that lead to structural injustice is simply a truth, and one that we need to face. "We should pause at the sight of such responsibility. Dwelling too long in the shadow of such awe can be paralyzing, to be sure. So we should move to

consideration of action, and then questions of what is possible and reasonable to expect come into play." The rest of the chapter is then devoted to making the idea of shared global responsibility manageable and tractable. She does this through a detailed consideration of sweatshop labor in the developing world, showing how many non-blameworthy actions collectively create a structure that is unjust, and looking at ways in which the anti-sweatshop political movement has "involved a great many people and achieved some success in creating a public discussion of injustice of working conditions and some changes in institutions and practices."

This chapter contains a lot of empirical material, as, with Young's always bracing realism, she shows how her abstract model helps us confront an actual political challenge. Along the way she discusses, sympathetically but critically, work by Charles Beitz and Allen Buchanan that bears on the question of how we imagine personal responsibility for global harms.

In thinking about who bears responsibility for ameliorating global ills, she now argues, we ought to consider several specific parameters: First, we must look at an agent's *power,* her position, within structural processes, for actual influence over those processes. People who have greater influence have greater responsibility. Second, we ought to consider an agent's *privilege.* Privilege and power usually go together, but in most such situations there are some privileged agents who don't have much causal influence; nonetheless, simply because of their privileged lives, they have greater responsibility than others. Third, we must consider an agent's *interest.* Here what Young means is that people who are the most affected, the victims of structural injustice, have a particularly strong interest in changing the situation, so they ought to take more responsibility than others for doing so. Finally, people should think about what Young calls *collective ability.* What she has in mind is that individuals are sometimes members of groups in such a way that they can draw on the resources of an already existing group, such as a stockholder organization, a labor union, or a church group, and use that group as a resource for change. Such membership gives individuals a larger share of responsibility.

Notice, then, that so far Young has focused on individuals and on groups that form part of "civil society." She has said little about state responsibility or about the responsibility of international

institutions. In the concluding section of the chapter, she states clearly that she does consider both of these very important in thinking about shared responsibility, but she also thinks that they have too often been the exclusive focus of accounts of global justice. In downplaying them and playing up other more informal associations, she seeks to right the balance.

Chapter 6 is entitled "Avoiding Responsibility." Here Young studies different ways of thinking through which people avoid accepting their responsibility with respect to global structures. The first is *reification,* or the pretense that the processes that produce in justice are inevitable and unchangeable, like natural forces that cannot be otherwise. (Here she discusses Marx, Lukacs, and Sartre in an illuminating way.)

The second bad strategy is *denying connection.* Many people simply deny that they have any connection to people at a distance, while accepting responsibility for the conditions of people close at hand. Often this strategy is assisted by using the guilt idea: the person says, look, I've done nothing wrong, so how can you ask me to take responsibility for improving these conditions? Drawing on Onora O'Neill's analysis of global interconnection, Young argues that we do bear responsibility for a wide range of global conditions.

The third impediment to accepting responsibility lies in what Young calls "the demands of immediacy": we acknowledge that we are connected to millions of strangers, but we also point out that we simply have no resources left for such people; our time and energy are used up on the demands made on us by relationships of immediate interaction. Here, drawing on Levinas, Young insists that "every other is an irreducible and unique locus of need and desire" and that we cannot avoid the ethical demand to weigh the interests of the distant against those of the close, not if we are ethical beings in the first place. There is "an irreducible, even tragic, tension in moral life," given that we must take care of our own and also attend to the "potentially infinite" claims of distant individuals. What we should say is that we can never fully discharge our ethical responsibility: the ledger is never fully balanced. But we must not on that account withdraw our attention from people at a distance from us. One way in which we can at least reduce the tension between the near and the far is to enlist those we love in the shared task of working for global justice: in that way "the

attention and energy we put into being personally responsive to others is at the same time attention and energy devoted to political responsibility for justice."

The last bad strategy Young considers is the attitude that says this is "not my job." This strategy, once again, is aided by the use of guilt as a central moral category: for I say, pin the blame on someone else; I clearly haven't done anything wrong. Here Young discusses critically Bob Goodin's suggestion that in cases where there is nobody to blame we ought to rely on the state to take action. As before, Young feels that leaving things to the state narrows the sphere of responsibility much too much, leaving individuals free to think that they have nothing to do other than pay their taxes. But even government's ability to rectify structural injustice depends on the active involvement of its citizens in that endeavor. And given the great extent to which assets and activities that might elsewhere or at another time have been in state hands are, in the United States today, in private hands, we can hardly expect stripped-down government to solve such problems even with support.

Each excuse for not accepting responsibility, Young concludes, has a truthful basis, sees something that is real. But each is ultimately an evasion of responsibility that we ought to assume. The rhetoric of guilt distracts us from that shared project.

II. Guilt and Responsibility

As this summary shows, this is a rich and exciting book, raising issues of central importance. One is the distinction between guilt and responsibility, which lies at the core of Young's argument.

In Young's view, an agent is guilty in cases where she has done a blameworthy action. Blameworthiness usually requires harmful intent, although Young recognizes that in some cases it may only require a culpable degree of negligence. She briefly recognizes, too, that we hold people legally accountable without any showing of mens rea in cases involving strict liability, such as statutory rape, although this recognition plays, so far as I can see, no subsequent role in her argument.

Young does not tightly define responsibility, since her concept emerges by way of discussion and critique of Arendt. But let me do

so on her behalf. An agent is responsible, by contrast, only if (a) the agent is causally embedded in processes that produce a problematic result and (b) the agent is in a position to assume ongoing forward-looking responsibility (in cooperation with others) for ameliorating those conditions. At times, these two conditions appear to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being responsible, but at times, as in the passage I quoted earlier, Young adds a third element: citizens in general ought to monitor and superintend the institutions in their society, and it is by virtue of that general moral duty of citizenship (in addition, presumably, to the first two conditions) that a given agent can be said to be responsible. I don't think this third condition creates any obscurity in Young's account, since presumably she thinks this general normative fact always holds, both of citizens in their domestic relations and of members of the global community in their international relations.

Young makes two distinct types of arguments for distinguishing guilt from responsibility and in favor of ascribing responsibility, but not guilt, to citizens in a society that contains structural injustice: two intrinsic or conceptual arguments, and several pragmatic arguments. The first conceptual argument says that guilt requires blameworthiness, but agents often participate in structural injustice without blameworthiness. The second conceptual argument says that guilt is backward-looking, whereas responsibility is forward-looking.

Now to Young's five pragmatic arguments. Young argues, first, that focusing on fixing blame distracts us from our future tasks. Second, she argues that it does worse than that, focusing our attention on a few likely culprits while apparently exonerating many other people who really ought to get involved in the task of making things better. Third, a focus on blame, because it targets individuals, tends to distract us from the background conditions within which injustice arises. Fourth, playing the "blame game" produces a squirming defensiveness rather than a helpful cooperativeness. Finally, fifth, guilt turns the mind inward, so that we become unhelpfully focused on the state of our own characters, rather than on the task that lies ahead of us.

Young's trenchant analysis transforms the nature of the debate about such matters. Nonetheless, although initially I was thoroughly convinced by Young's account, I am now less convinced. Let me try to say why.

First, let's consider the conceptual distinction. I think that it is really very difficult to maintain the retrospective/prospective portion of the distinction, guilt being appropriate to past acts only, and responsibility to future acts only, for the simple reason that time marches on. Let us stipulate that at time *t,* agent A bears responsibility R for social ill S. Time passes, and she shirks her responsibility. What should we say next? I think it can't be right to say, well, looking back on it, she did nothing wrong at *t,* and we should now forget about *t* and focus exclusively on what lies ahead of her at *t + 1.* If we take that line, preserving the clean distinction between retrospective guilt (which we're not supposed to be assigning to participants in structural injustice) and prospective responsibility (which we are supposed to be assigning to them), well, then people get a free pass indefinitely, since no task they have failed to shoulder ever goes onto the debit or guilt side of their ledger, and the new task always lies ahead of them. By contrast, it seems to me that what we ought to say is that if A has responsibility R for social ill S, and she fails to take it up, then, when the relevant time passes, she is guilty of not having shouldered her responsibility. I think that this follows quite simply from the logic of ought: Young says that A ought to shoulder the burden; well, that appears to imply that if A doesn't shoulder the burden A has done something wrong.

What about the second point, that agents can participate in structural injustice without doing anything culpable? Here I think we should definitely grant that A need not have malicious or harmful intent. But I do not think we should grant that A is not negligent. For if it is a general moral truth that citizens ought to monitor the institutions in which they live and be vigilant lest structural injustice occur within them, then I think it follows that they are culpably negligent if they do not shoulder that burden. The same seems true in the international sphere. Sometimes we may not want to blame the agent very much, since such general moral truths might not be known to her. But, here as elsewhere, ignorance of the law, including the moral law, is no excuse. Maybe we want to add a category of particularly non-culpable participation that is more analogous to strict liability, in the sense that no mens rea need be present at all; still, the agent has violated the law, and thus is guilty.